



# Tom Asacker

## Ten Years After. Random thoughts on business, brands and organizational success.

THIS IS THE TEN YEAR anniversary of the publication of my inaugural business book, *Sandbox Wisdom*. Since that little story was published, I've written three more books and I've spoken to hundreds of organizations around the world about marketplace success during chaotic times. My literary swan song, *Opportunity Screams: Unlocking Hearts and Minds in Today's Idea Economy*, is due for release before year's end.

I recently paused to consider what I've discovered during my journey. What has changed? What has remained the same? What has puzzled me? Have my principles stood the test of time? Where is the world of business headed? Rather than trying to distill my thoughts and insights into a pithy piece, I thought I'd simply share the results of my random, spiraling ruminations. I hope they make sense to you and provide worthy cause for your own reflection.

**The Grand Illusion.** Most people understand the world by chopping it into bits and categorizing those bits. But it's an illusion. For example, there is no discrete thing called "tree." "Tree" is simply a word we've created to refer to a particular pattern of ground, atmosphere, energy consuming and producing cells moving in shapes we call "branches," etc. The same is true in business. An organization is not a bunch of disconnected departments and activities, like marketing, finance, HR, operations, IT, et al. Rather, it's an arrangement, or pattern, in which every so-called part is a function of the whole. I've come to find that this "whole" is only seen and appreciated by a very few exceptional leaders, and that this one distinction, this dominant viewpoint, makes all the difference to their ongoing success.

**Bye-Bye Branding.** Despite my effort with *A Clear Eye for Branding* and the efforts of many others, for the vast majority of people the words "brand" and "branding" will *never* take on the strategic and unifying significance that we preach. Rather than suggesting a business philosophy and systematic approach to creating happy customers and increasing profitability, brand and branding will continue to evoke naming, logos, design and other aesthetic and mnemonic concerns. I'm over it. You should be too.

**What's the Recipe?** Business people hunger for a recipe for marketplace success. They swarm like bees to the plethora of

books, articles and advisors that promise "the way," despite the fact that there is no *one* way. At Southwest Airlines, the employee comes first. At Whole Foods, it's the customer. At Apple, it's the product (and Steve Jobs). There are no formulas, but there are patterns. My goal with *Opportunity Screams* is to expose those patterns and to have readers *feel* them in their bones. Success is about discovering insights, seeing with new eyes, not about following a new blueprint.

**Drowning in Complexity.** The marketplace is growing increasingly complex. Rather than understanding the underlying patterns for success and being driven by purpose and passion, leaders are parsing events and information to an unmanageable degree. Their ever-frustrated effort to gain complete assurance by analyzing data is creating anxious, fearful and dispirited employees. And this insipid attitude is spilling over to their partners, customers, and to the bottom line.

**Creation-Centric to Communication-Centric.** The modern marketplace was built by entrepreneurs obsessed with creating breakthrough ideas that transformed people's lives. Sadly, many of today's leaders are milking the innovations of their predecessors. Instead of gaining new insights into how to improve people's experiences and moving forward with bold innovations, they're wrapping old offerings in new sales, communication and entertainment packaging. It's a short-sighted, uninspiring, and future-mortgaging decision.

**Where's the Meaning?** The marketplace is, was, and always will be about meaning; meaning that communicates to the world—and to ourselves—who we are, what we believe in, and to what groups we belong. We choose products, services and causes based on a *feeling* of receiving distinctive value—a unique bundle of social, aesthetic, and functional meanings that feed our hungers to be liked, respected, and discerning. Apple, and a handful of other organizations, understand and embrace this reality and therefore continue to draw meaning-making consumers towards their high-margin models. To my utter confusion, the rest continue to chase the elusive, deal-seeking consumers with large, leaky nets of promotions, discounts and incentives. And that's no way to grow.